

# CO-CREATING RACIAL EQUITY IN VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT: Learning from Listening Sessions with Black, Indigenous and People of Color

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **Volunteer engagement has a critical problem:**

*The volunteers serving at nonprofit organizations don't reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the communities these nonprofits support.*

The Minnesota Alliance for Volunteer Advancement (MAVA) has been conducting research and education on race equity in volunteerism for the past 5 years. Through our research we've learned that making small tweaks to problematic systems will not solve the issue of structural racism in volunteerism; instead we need to work with Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) communities to co-create new systems that are rooted in equity.

Through funding from the Minneapolis Foundation MAVA was able to convene the necessary voices - community members and volunteers who identify as BIPOC - to learn more about systemic inequities in volunteer engagement and imagine new systems of volunteerism.



We conducted 8 listening sessions with a total of 40 participants. Listening sessions took place between November 2020 and March 2021 and were held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This summary offers an overview of the topics discussed in the listening sessions and the overarching themes of our findings. **The full report is available for download on our website: [www.mavanetwork.org](http://www.mavanetwork.org).**

### **MOTIVATIONS FOR VOLUNTEERING**

We asked listening session participants about why they volunteer (or, for those who don't use the word volunteer, why they help others in their community). Participants cited the following motivating factors for their volunteerism, whether formal or informal.

- Value instilled by family or upbringing
- Desire to contribute to community in cyclical way
- Reciprocity
- Responsibility or duty
- Personal connection to a cause or group
- Received benefit or personal empowerment
- Faith-based value
- Be part of the solution to problems
- Representation

## **BARRIERS TO VOLUNTEERING**

We asked listening session participants about the barriers they perceived or experienced with regard to formal volunteer opportunities. Below are the barriers most frequently discussed throughout the listening sessions.

- Formal systems, including forms, logging hours, background checks, and lengthy processes
- Time commitment and schedule
- Lack of compensation and incentives
- Unwelcoming environment
- Lack of trust of organization
- Not invited to participate
- Prioritizing organization over people

## **STEPS TOWARD EQUITY**

MAVA was fortunate in that listening session participants not only shared with us their experiences, but also their ideas for advancing equity in volunteerism. We grouped these ideas into the following themes:

- Create different ways of volunteering, which may include different pathways for different people, removing barriers, and/or compensating volunteers
- Prioritize BIPOC leadership at organizations engaging volunteers
- Built trust between nonprofit organizations and BIPOC communities
- Foster a welcoming environment and culture within the organization and volunteer program
- Value people over organization – put the community’s needs first
- Understand systemic barriers – tear down and re-build when necessary

## **WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

MAVA analyzed the information provided through these listening sessions, reflected on our racial equity work in volunteerism over the past 5 years, and developed ideas for next steps to help you take action on the ideas communicated through these listening sessions.

First, it’s vitally important to listen to BIPOC voices. Therefore, we recommend you take time to read the full report, absorb the information, challenge your own viewpoints, and revisit uncomfortable sections. While we recognize this report reflects the viewpoints of a limited number of BIPOC individuals in a particular geography, the themes provide a great starting point for work at your own organization or in your own region.

Next, we recognize the role of volunteer engagement leader within (sometimes) complex nonprofit organizational structures. Therefore, we have grouped potential next steps into 3 sections: Organizational, Volunteer Program, and Individual.



### **AT THE ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL:**

- Advocate for equitable hiring practices at your organization: Inform leadership of the importance of representation at both the staff and volunteer levels
- Promote an inclusive organizational culture by making equity, diversity and inclusion education a priority for you and your volunteers; speak up when you encounter biased or racist practices

### **AT THE VOLUNTEER PROGRAM LEVEL:**

- Listen to BIPOC voices: Convene listening sessions of BIPOC volunteers at your organization and potential volunteers within new communities you would like to engage; compensate participants and let them know how you use the information they provide
- Review policies and systems with an equity lens, including your volunteer application, handbook, background check policies, onboarding system, training practices, and recognition
- Educate volunteers on race equity topics: Build antiracism into your new volunteer orientation and present additional trainings on a variety of race equity topics
- Build relationships in BIPOC communities: Reach out to culturally-led organizations in your area, be present at community and cultural events, and do the long-term work to build authentic partnerships based on mutual trust

### **AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL:**

- Prioritize your own equity education: If you have a budget for professional development, devote a significant portion to equity; spend time educating yourself through articles, books, movies, podcasts, and other resources
- Network with others doing work on race equity in volunteerism: Reach out to volunteer engagement colleagues at other organizations to help and support one another
- Influence other groups or organizations you're involved with: Consider equity when encountering any volunteer systems, whether as a staff, volunteer, or community member, and challenge groups to prioritize equity in volunteerism

***"I don't get why only certain people can volunteer. Certain people aren't good enough to help you even if it's something they care about. Systems don't appeal to me because they push people out and push people away."***

*- Listening session participant*

These potential action steps are not designed to be prescriptive, but rather to offer volunteer engagement leaders ideas for how to use the information in this report to begin making change toward racial equity in volunteerism.

**Find more information and download the full report at  
[www.mavanetwork.org](http://www.mavanetwork.org).**

